

## AWARD FOR DISTINGUISHED PUBLIC SERVICE

# MICHAEL A. SPRAYBERRY

While not born in North Carolina, Mike Sprayberry undoubtedly embodies the state's motto "Esse quam videri" to his core.

Emphasis on work ethic, acceptance of others, and honesty have been common denominators in Sprayberry's life since childhood. "There was no fibbin'," he reflects on growing up with two younger brothers in rural Georgia, helping his grandfather on a family farm, and working as a janitor in a local drugstore. "We were by no means wealthy; it was a modest but good life."

His father's career in the greeting card business led the family to relocate often, landing Sprayberry in Charlotte, N.C., during high school. He candidly admits he was not an exemplary student, but the deeply ingrained virtues of hard work, commitment, and building relationships served him well. Sprayberry's parents encouraged him and his brothers to meet people. He chuckles, "I think that's why none of us are shy."

Sprayberry joined the United States Marine Corps in 1973 "to secure a college education and for the greatest challenge of my life," he says. He entered the North Carolina Army National Guard in 1977 and went on to become a first-generation college graduate, earning both a bachelor's and master's degree from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

He attributes his success to his father and offers an anecdote: "Before I left for Parris Island, he told me in his very crafty way that he wasn't sure I would make it because boot camp was so tough. He knew exactly what he was doing. Any time I felt like quitting, I would think back to him and keep pushing."



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Many accomplishments followed, from Outstanding Guardsman of the Year in 1984 as a Sergeant First Class, Distinguished Graduate at the Officer's Candidate School, North Carolina National Guard's Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame, Lacy E. Suiter Distinguished Service in Emergency Management Award, to the Order of the Long Leaf Pine. Yet Sprayberry humbly refers to all his accolades as a "framework" for his mindset.

He points out one aspect of serving in the military that has made a lasting impact on his life: "I have never seen a group of people from such diverse backgrounds work seamlessly together towards a shared goal while taking care of each other." His conviction to embrace inclusivity and diversity, not only for moral reasons but as a business model for collective achievement, informed his entire career. "You must listen to others. There is not a problem we can't solve if we work together. We have so much talent!"

Sprayberry joined the Division of Emergency Management in the North Carolina Department of Public Safety in 2005 and went on to become the longest serving director, weathering 19 state-declared and 11 federally-declared disasters with his now well-known mantra: "One team, one mission, one family."

He references another motto, "What have you done for the counties today?" as a daily reminder to himself and his teammates. "I urged the team to never become complacent and to always remember that the people of North Carolina depended on us for their safety."

Sprayberry is not afraid to list the challenges he encountered, noting hurricanes Matthew and Florence, the coal ash spill, and the pandemic as his greatest. Yet again, his upbringing and experiences have shaped how he established top priorities for averting and dealing with these and any other threats: Formulating a bullet-proof plan and forming partnerships for the most effective response.

Sprayberry gives credit where it's due, including to his colleagues at the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA): "The strong friendships I made allowed

me to lean on others and helped me solve issues during disasters. It's a phenomenal place to share best practices." In return, he challenged the NEMA team to diversify the discipline of emergency management, leading to the establishment of a Committee for Diversity and Equity.

Sprayberry doesn't shy away from referencing others who have influenced his leadership style and actions. In addition to his father and grandfather—both war veterans—Sprayberry's mentors include First Sergeant

Acosta as a leader who "helped me believe in myself," Command Sergeant Major Harold Eddins for teaching him "how to lead from the front," CSM Steve Blackwood for teaching him "how to take care of Soldiers", and Generals Rudisill, Carper, and Ingram for "holding a team accountable and focused."

He gives the highest regard to Dr. Mandy Cohen, former Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services and is quick to point out Governor Roy Cooper's Chief of Staff Kristi Jones: "She provided me with great advice and daily support as we went through many challenges together." Sprayberry adds earnestly and with a twinkle in his eye: "I'm a confident person, and I also know I can make mistakes. I always, and I mean always, listen carefully to my wife Laura."

And speaking of family, Sprayberry enjoys spending time on the coast of North Carolina, but adjusting to the slower pace since his retirement from the state in 2020 hasn't come easily.

He continues to consult on a part-time basis, frequently meets with his former colleagues and friends, and takes daily walks on the beach with his three dogs, Hobo, Red, and Rudy. "I love music. I love live shows," he enthusiastically shares his passion for rock and roll, with Hootie & the Blowfish and The Eagles concerts on his radar.

And although Sprayberry attends these concerts as a music-lover and not an emergency management professional, odds are that if chaos ensues, his fellow concert goers are in calm, steady, and safe hands.

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